

VZCZCXRO5476
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHTH #2149/01 3051445
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 011445Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0645
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 002149

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: GREEK ROMA: ILLEGAL CAMPS SQUALID -- BUT
ALTERNATIVES FEW

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin Quinville
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Roma in Greece -- both citizens and illegal migrants -- face increasing efforts by Greek authorities and businesses to evict them from squalid squatter camps around the country. Most Greeks have little sympathy for what they see either as a "lifestyle choice" or an intractable, unsolvable problem. When evictions occur, few provisions are made for alternative housing or social assistance, even for Greek citizen Roma. Widespread social exclusion leaves Roma little access to effective remedy. To its credit, the GOG has established a special government housing loan program for Roma; however, some local authorities have (mis)used it as a tool to move Roma out of their region. In our on-going dialogue with the GOG on human rights issues, we are encouraging synergy with OSCE, EU and NGO efforts in order to provide practical examples of "best practices" the GOG can implement. Otherwise, modern tourists seeking Greece's timeless civilization will continue making another timeless discovery: poverty and discrimination within sight of the Acropolis.

END SUMMARY.

BRUTAL CONDITIONS IN ILLEGAL SETTLEMENTS

¶2. (SBU) The Athens neighborhood of Votanikos is soon to be home to Athens' newest soccer stadium and upscale shopping mall. However, the land on which these enterprises will sit is currently illegally occupied by several hundred families of mostly immigrant Albanian Roma, living in the wretched conditions. Near-naked children run around caked in dirt. Unemployed adults sit idly on door steps with nothing to do, surrounded by pools of fetid water after a rain or choked by dust (the slum had no running water or electricity). These families are at the very bottom of Greek society, guilty of being both Roma and Albanian illegal migrants.

¶3. (C) To make way for construction, the Athens police, landowners, construction workers and other unknown private actors have, over the past few months, resorted to various tactics to drive the Roma squatters off the land. Police and others have ordered them to vacate. Representatives of the landowner/construction companies have showed up in force and told Roma to leave -- or else. And in still other cases, some businessmen have paid Roma families up to one thousand Euro to vacate the property immediately (a tough deal to turn down, but no long-term solution). The problem, however, is that none of these efforts have offered alternatives for these families once they leave Votanikos, as all parties agree they must.

INTERIOR MINISTRY: "ROMA CHOOSE THEIR LIFESTYLE"

14. (C) The Ministry of Interior's Secretary General Patroklos Georgiadis told us in July that some people (i.e., Roma) simply choose to live this way. He argued that there were two kinds of Roma at Votnikos: indigenous Greek Roma and foreign, illegal aliens. The former, he said, are entitled to every benefit that other Greek citizens are entitled to. The latter, however, were not; they were illegal aliens and subject to deportation. But, Georgiadis noted, Greece's deportation system is severely overburdened. Georgiadis, but oQ-----

15. (C) Greece does have a modest government program of funding to assist Roma in finding housing; it is designed to assist Roma families to receive housing loans of 60,000 Euro. But it is subject to misuse. The city of Nea Halicarnassus on the island of Crete thinks it has found a solution to their "Roma problem." Taking advantage of the federal government program, the mayor got virtually all 130 families in the local Roma camp to agree that they would vacate their shantytown homes once they received the housing loan. The local municipal government pressured the Interior Ministry to approve all of the loans, then set about destroying the shantytown with bulldozers, according to press accounts. But one leader of the Roma community at Nea Halicarnassus told poloff on July 10 that most Roma either didn't know what they were signing when they agreed to the mayor's scheme or didn't

ATHENS 00002149 002 OF 002

understand that the 60,000 Euro was not enough money for them to buy anything in the vicinity. The local newspaper, Kriti, reported the Deputy Mayor's boast that most Roma would have to leave the island as they would not be able to afford a home on Crete for 60,000 Euro. In speaking with us, the Deputy Mayor admitted the remark, but denied any racist intent.

16. (C) MOI SecGen Georgiadis confirmed that the government's housing loan program faced several valid problems. Some Roma were trying to receive the housing loan more than once; some were using different names for multiple applications, and others were applying twice through their unmarried partners or live-in girlfriends. Georgiadis claimed that the Ministry's technology was still not sufficiently developed to screen for double applications. Other Roma, he said, were receiving loans, purchasing properties with the funds and then renting out the new home while they continued to live in their shantytown flats. Finally, it was difficult for those families most in need of housing loans -- nomadic Roma -- to qualify even for the government's reduced-standard program. If they did qualify and received a home, nomadic Roma would eventually leave it when they moved on to another part of Greece or beyond, Georgiadis said.

DEALING WITH VOTNIKOS: IF THERE'S A WILL, IS THERE A WAY?

17. (C) Georgiadis told us that Votnikos was an issue discussed by both his office and the Mayor's office; both were looking for equitable solutions. Asked about specifics, however, he suggested they were still only in "preliminary discussions" and "all will come together to discuss the problem" at an unknown date and time in the future. He readily agreed to keep us informed of such steps when (and if) they do occur. As of late October, no such information was available from his office.

COMMENT

18. (C) In our discussions with Georgiadis and others, we have cited examples of how other countries -- such as Ireland and the U.K. -- have dealt more effectively with similar issues. We have argued that Greece has an opportunity to distinguish itself within the European Union by providing

increased protection for its Roma population on an issue that is garnering increasing attention, both in Greece and internationally. To date, however, the Greek government has taken few tangible steps, either on the specific issue of housing or on the larger issue of the Roma population's social exclusion. While complaints about Roma illegally squatting on privately held land are legitimate, the GoG has thus far done little to provide effective alternative housing solutions or assistance. We continue to raise this issue with GOG officials; the head of the U.S. delegation to the September OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw raised it as well. Our challenge: to get GOG officials to devote both political will and resources to a stereotyped population that few Greeks recognize as fellow citizens. Our strategy: to encourage synergy with OSCE, EU and NGO efforts -- giving the GOG examples of practical "best practices" it can implement. Otherwise, modern tourists seeking Greece's ancient civilization will continue making another timeless discovery: poverty and discrimination within sight of the Acropolis.

COUNTRYMAN